

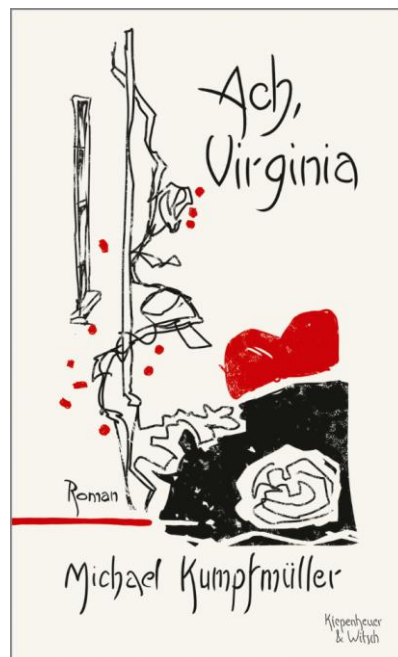
Sample translation from „Ach, Virginia” by Michael Kumpfmüller  
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# Oh, Virginia

by Michael Kumpfmüller

Sample Translation by Jamie Bulloch

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## [INTERCONTINENTAL FLIGHT]

*It takes some time before she has everything ready: her language; the tone, which for her is more important than any storyline, although she has stories too, of course; and then the modicum of luck one needs to make it to the top, and that is what she wants.*

*She has had the occasional alarm along the way, but now, having turned thirty, all of that appears to be in the past – her first novel is an instant success. It has been received favourably in the newspapers, with some enthusiasm even. This young woman is a talent, about whom more will be heard in the future. That is the general assumption, at any rate, although for the moment everyone else seems to be more confident of it than her.*

*She has the reputation of being difficult. Her sense of humour is rather cold, she has a quick, sharp tongue and is fond of stripping people to the bone, for which she is prepared to resort to almost any means necessary. Indeed, she is most amusing in company.*

*Men are her curse. Until her late twenties it looks as if she is heading for a life as a nun, but then all of a sudden she marries a man who, like her, is trying to make his way as a writer and he is a Jew too. But why not? They will end up tolerating each other for nigh on thirty years.*

*Virginia and Leonard.*

*Is there anything they do not have, apart from successful copulation, which is terribly overrated, anyway?*

*They are the golden couple of their time and milieu.*

*In the first few years they are on a tight budget, but they own houses in the country, living first in one, then the other, and of course they have a flat in London as well. They work and receive hordes of guests.*

*The money starts coming in when they establish their own publishing house. They move several times to different parts of town and get used to a comfortable lifestyle: they have a telephone and electric lights, and staff of course, someone to cook and keep the rooms tidy. When the opportunity arises they purchase their first automobile, life is fast-paced and colourful, and they must be the envy of many. They have heaps of friends with whom the most obscure topics are discussed, and they are guests at the most prestigious addresses in the capital, which teem with smart people, not all of them interesting by any means. But what fun it is to rip them to shreds as they make their way home through the night-time streets of Richmond, or even in the middle of the soirée itself, often creating a nice little scandal and acquiring the girl who will never grow up quite the reputation as a schemer.*

\*

*With every book she publishes her fame increases. As the spotlight falls on her, it is easy for outsiders to overlook the very old shadows as well as the new ones that haunt her, haunt her soul, shall we say, for days or even weeks, if the reviews have yet to appear or fail to turn out as she had hoped, and she spends all day just quivering.*

*All in all, however, her unhappiness is kept within bounds for two decades. She often lies down for a while and harbours dark thoughts, before bravely getting to her feet again and climbing onto the next, even bigger carousel that is life as a celebrity.*

*The years pass as if in flight; something is always happening. Periodically she gets close to colleagues and she has precarious affairs with women, alongside regular farewells, withdrawals into her inner space, the Paralympic intimacy with her husband.*

*During the cold months of the year the couple spend most of the time in town, but when May comes around their appetite to travel is whetted and they cross the sea to visit neighbouring countries: Germany before Hitler and under him, Italy before Mussolini and under him, Ireland, France and the Netherlands, not forgetting beautiful Greece.*

\*

*When war breaks out their lives become substantially more complicated, their inner lives no less than their external ones. What once was happily taken for granted is suddenly in doubt; everything might be over tomorrow, and before she realises it her world has become much darker and narrower.*

*Nor is it any comfort that, for the time being, the German soldiers are on the rampage elsewhere, for the catastrophe is proceeding at breathtaking speed. Moreover, this Herr Hitler commands an imposing air force, and in May 1940 the devils get serious, dropping the first bombs on London, as well as on other cities.*

*At first the damage appears to be slight; with their own eyes they can persuade themselves that only others are affected for now, but one day their property is hit too. Overnight the flat in Mecklenburgh Square becomes a ruin, and everything in it that has survived unscathed must be removed to the country, albeit where life is only comparatively safer, for German aircraft regularly pass over her little summer house. They are expecting the end to come at any time, an end spelled by invasion and occupation, and obtaining food supplies becomes increasingly difficult. They no longer have any full-time servants of course; a woman from the village is paid by the hour to take care of the house, but apart from her they only have each other, and in the long term this is unlikely to be healthy for any couple one could care to mention.*

\*

*If life were an intercontinental flight, she would definitely be on her descent. Most of the journey is behind her, she is approaching the runway, skimming over scattered settlements, fields, meadows, before the aeroplane comes to land on solid ground with quite a bump. The earth has retrieved another of her children, there is some taxiing, a touch more movement, but one is categorically on the ground, and the rest – sorry to say – is merely transit and winding-up, without any real significance.*

*She turned fifty-nine recently, and in truth this number, and the face to which it is attached, could plunge her into a depression. But that is not the issue. Nor is it the new novel that she has recently finished, even though the novel does play a role in her growing restlessness and feebleness. In short, she feels worse than she has for years. Life in the country, which for a long time was so wonderful, has become an irksome routine. She is missing people, arguments, any form of stimulation that might spark something, but instead she is sitting beneath the skies of East Sussex, populated by German bombers, and boring herself to death in the truest sense of the word.*

*When she turned forty she imagined one would no longer need other people after the age of fifty, but it transpires that this was a*

*tremendous error of judgment. Without company she feels starved, she rails against her diminishing fame, against the fact that nobody seems interested in her any longer. For weeks she has lain more or less idly at home, pestered by all manner of voices; at night she can barely sleep and she prowls around her bedroom in search of a light, something to get her out of this, some reading to wake her up, a plan for a new book, but try as she might nothing comes to mind, save for the wish that things should not continue in this way.*

*She cannot go on any longer.*

*That is putting it mildly. In truth she is terrified of going mad and wishes to shuffle off her mortal coil as soon as possible.*

*Naturally it would involve some effort on her part. Just get up and go, she thinks, and this is probably the only idea she has ever had, that one day you get up and go, irrespective of what is around you, assuming there is something, but sadly this does not appear to be the case.*

\*

**[TUESDAY, 18<sup>TH</sup> MARCH]**

She is writing a letter to her husband, which marks the beginning of the end. She has put it off over and over again, but now the time has come.

As in the good years, she sits in her writing den in the garden, where a fair proportion of her work has been written, a handful or two of novels, letters, her diaries, the odd review or whatever else she did at her desk: cursing, for the most part, waiting for words and phrases to come, then diving deep into her finely chiselled inner worlds, while outside the garden has been ever present, and in this garden are Leonard, the wonderful flowers, trees, the pond, small creatures, and not far away her beloved landscape of the Downs.

As in those seconds before falling asleep, all of this washes over her before she starts writing in desperate haste, peculiarly buoyant, as if pleased by the words flowing from her pen, the new verve with which she is writing, because everything is irrefutably true, here, in what she has to believe will be her last letter, which is devoid of any flourishes and hardly needs an addressee.

‘Dearest, I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can’t go through another of those terrible times. And I shan’t recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can’t concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don’t think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can’t fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can’t even write this properly. I



can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that – everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. V.'

This is what she writes.

It takes her less than ten minutes, it is her closing balance, though experience has taught her that words occasionally set something in motion which would never have been set in motion otherwise, and in this respect she is principally writing the letter for herself.

\*

The weather is terrible today, it is raining, cold and windy as well, although this does not prevent her from leaving the garden house practically before the ink on the paper is dry and heading down to the river, which meanders through the countryside barely ten minutes away.

One has to say she is almost running, oddly crouched, like an animal in flight. She keeps left to get to the hidden part of the garden, and from there on to the gate, glancing carefully in all directions, for the man who is her consort and minder has his eyes and ears everywhere. If he

notices her trying to leave the property in an open fur coat he will definitely stop her.

But she is lucky: Leonard is busy, he does not see or hear her; in fact he is not even at home. He told her he was going shopping, perhaps he is in Lewes. But this hardly matters anymore as she has a comfortable head start and is making good progress. Besides, the icy rain is like a gown that envelops her completely, rendering her virtually invisible. She is immediately soaked to the bone.

Otherwise she takes nothing in apart from her breath, her footsteps, and the odd patch of green, for there is little to see, not even the river she has spoken to several times, and look! – all of a sudden it lies before her.

Now ought to be the time for some last thoughts, a brief pause to make sure she is actually doing the right thing, but she is beyond thinking, the thing thinks itself, so to speak, this close to her goal, just a few steps more, as she climbs down the bank and without any further ado throws herself into the river.

The water is cold. It is about as cold as the rain, a touch chillier perhaps, although the difference is only slight, which means she continues to freeze, but it will soon be over. Things, however, do not run as smoothly as she had anticipated.

The current immediately drags her to the right, but she does not properly go under; she is briefly submerged before rising to the surface

again. No sign of drowning. She merely floats like a fool on the gurgling, whooshing water, now by one bank, now by the other, and when she feels the ground beneath her feet she is forced to admit that this is not going to work. She stands up straight, alive, and alive she climbs, shivering, up the bank far from where she entered the water, then staggers back towards the house from where, to her horror, Leonard comes hurrying to meet her.

Right now he is the last person she wishes to see.

She cannot recall ever having felt so frozen. Her teeth are chattering, she is that cold, which undoubtedly means that she is alive, her entire body is crying it loud and clear, making fun of her, and indeed she feels frightfully small and stupid.

Leonard barely looks at her when he gets there.

My God, why aren't you inside the house, this isn't the weather to go walking in, he says, and she is pretty much certain that he knows nothing of her intention.

Yes, she says, not protesting when with subdued impatience he marches her across the garden and into the downstairs drawing room, where he is suddenly in possession of a towel, and with this towel he dries her with rapid, abrupt strokes, every part of her he can, hair, face, around the eyes, nose, mouth, neck, like the tender routine of a carer, she thinks, although she is not so much thinking as focusing on the movements of his fingers and to what extent these still relate to her.

When he is finished with his task she stands where she is, staring at a spot in the room just to the left of one of the windows, at a patch of wall, then with a shake of his head he sends her to her room and instructs her to put on some dry clothes.

Yes, she says a second time, but makes no move to go, so without another word he takes her to the bedroom and waits while inside she calls herself an idiot for having run off so rashly and aimlessly. Clearly the sickness is making her stupid or it is the silly voices that have been bothering her for days and fail to mention that when going into the water one needs to fill one's coat pockets with stones.

\*

Her carer and the person who means everything to her, Leonard, could of course ask what she was doing out there in the wind and rain, but he does not. Were he to confront her with questions now she would at once start screaming; it is bad enough that he is here, stroking her head soothingly.

She knows that for years now he has been writing some sort of novel about her, up in his room where he regularly makes notes, for this is what he is doing, keeping a record of her, the daily ups and downs, the collapses and recoveries, her flitting eyes, and how she sleeps and eats, or

whatever else relating to her gradual descent into madness that he may consider noteworthy.

Since she came back from the river the only expression he has worn is that of a minder. He looks concerned, but he has no inkling of what happened down there, of how pathetically and ridiculously wet she was, as if she were actually a madwoman.

Perhaps she thinks she is.

\*

When he finally leaves she retires to her bed, for whenever she feels like a failure she lies down; she has spent half her life in bed. It is the afternoon, until recently the time of day she would spend reading the newspaper or writing her diary, but she has not read or written anything for weeks; all she wants to do is to get back under the water.

Her notebooks contain a variety of stories about people who went to a watery grave: the old woman, a local, who drowned at Piddinghoeel; or that day during the Great War when three bodies were seen floating downstream at Teddington. Years ago her friend and fellow writer, Hugh Walpole, tried to drown himself because of lovesickness, something only women do, but poor Hugh was in love with a man too.

These are more or less her thoughts as the birds sing outside as usual, now that spring is finally here and everything is starting anew, which they welcome and celebrate in all possible variations, thereby only showing how stupid they are.

There are days when she will understand word for word what the birds are saying amongst themselves, but today all she hears is song, in which she is not mentioned once. They do not particularly like her, that much is clear, her damned vanity and how little she has achieved in her life, which is why she is now picking up the bill for it all, and deservedly so.

Everything has been in vain; the edifice that is her life now lies in ruins. It is not utter chaos, however, for somebody has cleared up a little and neatly placed the material in several heaps, stone and wood and metal, although with the best will in the world she cannot see what might be done with any of this one day.

This is roughly the picture inside her, what she comprehends in images, and she is faintly interested in the possibility of wandering through the remnants of one's life. Everything is ruined beyond repair, but it is still present: the voices in the brightly lit rooms; the appetising aromas of lunches and dinners; some music, which has almost faded to nothing and given way to a hideous silence.

Inside her, it is very quiet. Even the birds seem to have finished singing, although now she wonders whether there were any birds in the first place, and of course there is nothing at all outside, as she realises when she gazes out of the window, just the shower of the rain, while in her head is the suppressed rage, directed at Leonard, his expression earlier and the way he always acts as if he understood, whereas he understands nothing at all.

\*

At some point he comes in with a plate of sandwiches that Louie, the good fairy from the village, has made for her. But she has no desire to eat; she sends the man and the sandwiches away, listening to his footsteps as he returns to the kitchen full of worry, unless mentally he is already back in his garden.

Were it not for the never-ending rain one could, now in mid-March, do things in the garden, a bit of pruning, weeding, planting, dig the dark earth or just look to see what is on its way, tulips and narcissi, the first tender buds on the trees.

If she is being honest, she has always despised his year-round fussing in the garden. Yes, it has given her a certain amusement, but she has no appreciation of it, because a garden like that requires a deference to

the same unchanging procedures, which for her borders on weakness, to say nothing of the costs, about which they have argued several times.

In her eyes there is something heroic about how every year he plants and supports and waters and climbs into the trees, mows the lawn and captures the wasps, she almost admires him for it, the fulfilment he has busying himself with the minor matters of everyday life. She may write about these, but only rarely takes pleasure in them.

And yet a garden like this really is very beautiful when everything blooms in spring and summer, and the fragrances drift on the air. Besides, it offers a great deal of variety: at the end of the sizeable lawn, a view stretching way into the Downs; her writing house, obviously, the church and graveyard beside it; and beyond these the orchard. The grounds are so large and rambling that one can almost take a proper stroll in them. One can play bowls or ponder life by the goldfish pond, receive guests old and new, show them around, which Leonard loves to do or, more accurately, loved, for practically nobody comes to visit these days.

In the end, however – and to be absolutely blunt – the garden means little to her, something Leonard certainly knows and has even discussed, for he clings to their life together, whereas she hangs to this life by a mere thread, and the garden is a good example of that.

Now, in March, the evenings are totally dark. She can make out a few shapes, something bending in the wind then standing straight again.



The longer she looks the more certain she is that Leonard is out there. She fancies she can see him working on a patch of lawn beside the graveyard wall, lifting something from the ground and immediately tossing it aside, but perhaps this is just her imagination and it is merely a shadow of who knows what, a hidden clue as to what will remain, Leonard and his garden, and when Leonard is no more, the garden by itself, before the garden too is no more.

\*

Maybe she ought to write about Leonard's garden, about the life of butterflies, the wind, the inexhaustible diversity of cloud formations, the fish that glint red in the pond, the duckweed, the taste of duckweed.

Will she ever write again?

She doubts this more than anything.

She could keep working on her memoirs, with which she was preoccupied recently, but the past is toxic to her; if one writes about the past one is never free of it, one merely freezes it, buries it beneath mounds of words, most of them insincere, which is why ultimately everything remains in a state of ferment.

She is utterly fed up with this constant ferment, with never being able to put it behind her, always ending up with the same impasse, distress,

ridicule. For what is one single, flimsy I compared to the universe and the stars within it, to the cold outside which not even the German bombers can reach, and they reach pretty much everywhere?

Maybe she ought to write about the stars, about a journey into the universe, weave a story of how bitterly cold it is there, how inhospitable, while insisting against all reason on being a guest, a welcome visitor, even though she is never welcome anywhere and instead must fly through empty space in a capsule, warming herself with her body's own vibrations.

There are no stars to be seen outside; the night is pitch black. How foolish it is to contemplate the stars when she has no interest in them. In fact, she has no interest in anything at all. She will not read a newspaper, has no desire to hear about fresh disasters on the wireless. In short, she is the most boring person in the world.

Heavens, she used to be so amusing in company, or in her letters, with her malicious remarks about other people's misfortunes, her guillotine-like judgements about the appearance and character of goodness knows whom, whereas now she is just circling her own pitiful misfortune.

As she cannot think of anything new to say about herself she will not write anymore, for in essence one always writes about oneself, even when writing about a storm in a garden.

She would have to think more closely, but she lacks any inclination to, even though of course she is always thinking or perceiving something,

here, in her room, objects, her own smell, the gentle rustle of the bedspread when she turns over.

She could write about all this: the great silence around her and all the tiny details that life consists of, even if like her one lies in bed, knowing only that one is alive.

One is alive, and that is precisely what life is.

\*

Leonard is back. In fact he just pops in, as though worried that if he comes any closer she might suddenly throw a fit and take a swipe at him like that time after their wedding. Indeed, he stays in the doorway.

She is not happy at his coming to check on her. He must be anxious that she could have caught a cold after her peculiar stroll, and he impresses on her once more that she must not go outside without her coat fastened.

Yes, yes, she says. And no, she hasn't caught a cold, she's just shattered, although she doesn't rightly know why.

She says this with a faint smile to herself and wonders, not for the first time, who he really is.

She knows the minutest details about him, his smell probably least of all, but his inexhaustible goodness, his harshness, oh yes, his severe face, sinewy hands, arms, the look that holds others captive, but most of all

his unrelenting harshness, against himself, against his enemies, sometimes against her.

Not wanting him to stay now either, she smiles at him incessantly like a small girl, which is after all what she is and will remain so until the very end.

She would just like to sleep forever, she says, in the hope that after her moment of madness that morning she will be rewarded with a smidgeon of sleep for having come to her senses just in time, even though it was a great folly. But maybe folly is actually part of reason.

The letter she wrote to him... She has forgotten what she did with the letter.

Did she get out of bed at some point and fetch it? If she did fetch it, which is hardly likely, it must be here in the room, somewhere amongst the editions of Shakespeare, she hopes or suspects. If she put it on the chimneypiece or it dropped to the floor, however, that would be a disaster, and thus she needs to cast an eye over everything while she is lying here, but do it in a way that Leonard does not notice. Unfortunately he does notice and from his gaze she suspects he long believes her to be mad.

No, no, it's nothing, she says to this gaze, please go, you can go now, don't worry, I'm not hearing voices, the ghosts have gone back home, they want to sleep like me, please let me sleep.

And yet she knows she will not sleep now, she is lying, and as a liar she is almost in her element again; if she is able to lie, something of her must still be present.

\*

**[WEDNESDAY, 19<sup>TH</sup> MARCH]**

Her inability to sleep has been an irritating routine for weeks now, which does not mean that she stays awake or has waking dreams, even though one could call it dreaming, a vague consideration of her options and of how prepared she is to abandon herself again to her feelings, as she endeavoured to do a few hours ago by the river: I will enter the river, not out of sorrow, but because somebody is waiting for me there.

A frivolous thought, undoubtedly, slightly embarrassing even, although it has nothing to do with physical love; but then again it does in a manner of speaking, and how exciting it is to fantasise about the key moments, the approximate sequence of events, kisses and embraces, the exploration, not to forget the sighs, the pausing and the bliss that this pausing harbours, the final rapture.

Since her mid-forties she has been preoccupied by the notion that death must be transformed into something exhilarating; when she was

young she thought the same of marriage. In her mid-forties this was no more than a phrase, a cheeky, no-longer-youthful glance into the future, but now there is an active interest too, a keenness to welcome whatever it might actually be.

She is almost enjoying herself. Rarely in her life has she felt like this, a few times with Vita who made her miserable and joyful in equal measure, in the golden age of experimentation, although the love affair with Vita rather caught her off-guard; by the time she started to take it seriously it was virtually over.

How she should like to be a beautiful lover for the river, young and lissom; she should like him to see and harbour her, naked and acquiescent as she is right now. Yes, my dearest, she says or whispers, so far as she can whisper without words, and she seems to be able to do it.

There is something abstract, intangible about these reflexions, something most unlikely because she is still lying alone in her bed, but at the same time – however bizarre it sounds – starting to disrobe down by the river, without much shame yet terribly anxious about what her lover will think of her, so naked and trembling as she was that one time with Vita, even though this is very different from how it was with Vita, for then it was business, a deal, then there were conditions, but now there are no conditions.

She can only weep about the wistful, unconditional nature of this association. And indeed now she does weep, not for very long, silently, almost blissfully, teetering on the edge of sleep before drifting off and later waking once more.

\*

She continues to be astonishingly calm. She has distanced herself from her lover; he is still there all right, but no longer beside her. It will be some time before she can approach him again; at the moment her sense of defeat is too overwhelming.

She sips the milk that Leonard brought her hours ago. She is awake and she is content to be awake; her sleeplessness is like a shell, a sort of hut where she crouches on the floor waiting for what will happen.

Although the hut is not particularly large, inside there is room for the entire house, the sleeping things within it, the silence, but also the houses and flats from earlier in her life, which number many, nine in London alone, most of them on squares, not to mention the properties in the country: unforgettable St Ives, which she immortalised in *Journey to the Lighthouse*; dark and wet Asham, ever gloomy despite the six large windows; as well as the house in which she is now awake, her terminus, called Monk's House.

She used to wander around all these dwellings, and she is still able to, although she sometimes trips up over detail, is unable to find objects or has to shuffle them around, a door, bulky cupboards, beds, views, and then begins to fashion one or the other, repaint a wall or break a window where none was there before.

Books are dwellings too, she has always thought, dark dungeons or cathedrals flooded with light, huts or palaces, as the case may be.

Indeed she has spent her life building: sentences, walls, breaches, chapters with or without a vista.

Writing is grubby work, it makes one filthy, one sweats and creates a mess, one roams empty spaces.

With every book she has begun she has dreamed of moving and renovating, unfinished halls and roofs through which the rain poured in, walls with unsightly paper that had to be scraped off, as well as the vast amount of odds and ends that needed sorting out and which she would never be done with, and yet each time she did manage to finish.

That is something, isn't it?

One could live inside books. One could move in, settle down, criticise the detail of course, the colours and hues, which are a matter of taste after all, but what are these in comparison to the trustworthy walls and windows that let in so much light, magnificently connecting the inside with the outside?



For a few minutes she is almost reassured.

She has no plan, she is not building at the moment, but she is considering it, the space is there, all she needs is to go in, even though surely it would be smart to wait a while here, inside her hut, wait before getting up and beginning.

2

In the morning she fancies she can hear engine noises outside, an aircraft, she assumes, an enemy on the hunt for her, but fortunately or unfortunately, it fails to find her.

She mulls this over. Nobody knows exactly when they will come, but it is as good as certain that they will come. They will always invent new weapons and will smother every strip of land with inextinguishable fires, turning everything to rubble and ashes, the trees, plants, screaming children, birds, houses, their inhabitants, all of whom will fall victim without exception, without regard for sex or age, again and again until the land is populated by an immense army of corpses and everywhere is a barren emptiness, an area that will remain uninhabitable for decades.

Potentially there is something about this she is not averse to.

She would rather not be consumed by these conflagrations herself, but she is interested in the idea of a clean slate; it is absolutely horrible, but interesting. For some people will rebuild it all, and what a promise that is, the ability to rebuild everything from scratch, rethink it all, redesign it all, not merely the houses, streets and cities, but the human being too, his soul, insofar as a soul exists. The old would be irrevocably lost, all the misfortune inherent in what was old could be torn out and readjusted, the

laws regulating what constitutes a man and what a woman, all the rubbish about enmity and sorrow.

Leonard would laugh at her for such musings, if they can be called musings, for in truth they are merely images, internal states of mind, possibilities, because everything does remain possible, always, however improbable this may appear at the moment. Man himself is one such improbable possibility, as is the existence of life, the universe, the stars, this moment here in her bed, the existence of this single moment and of the I inhabiting it, the I moving effortlessly to the next moment and the one after that.

\*

And now, finally, she finds sleep. It is early morning, well after six, and we have the opportunity to observe her for some time, roughly from the position where Leonard will observe her later, half-way between the door and the bed, the tired, sleeping woman that she is, the aging girl who is not lovely to regard, not like this with her mouth open and sunken cheeks.

Her hair is rather tousled from yesterday. It looks as if she only gave it a cursory comb, if at all; she is not taking care of herself, she is letting herself go, although she has never paid particular attention to her appearance, she is not skilled at it and for years has been embroiled in ill-

tempered hat and clothes dramas, tedious battles in front of the looking glass from which she rarely emerges the victor, and on the rare occasion that she does, she is later mocked by a Clive or whoever else for a new dress or hat, upon which she just wants to sink into the ground with shame.

Her breathing is calm. One might almost doubt that she *is* breathing, at least there appears to be no conclusive proof of it yet, and so we lean forward a little to listen more closely to the sounds she is making, and now we can clearly hear a quiet rustling or scraping, then nothing for a while, before we finally make out her breathing, which is not as shallow as we might have expected.

Is it not perfectly normal? There is a stable rhythm, a regular in and out, giving us no need to worry about this unkempt creature for the time being; she is alive, she has not run away, but is here and waiting for her husband, who has arranged to go to London today, although he is not leaving quite yet.

\*

This is the second time he has entered her room. She was only vaguely aware of him the first time, but now she can smell tea and marmalade close by. Good old Leonard has brought her breakfast in bed and she is surprised to find herself feeling frightfully hungry. He asks about her night and sits

down on the chair where she lays her clothes, where she laid them yesterday too, and she almost likes him sitting there in his shirt and jacket, his hands folded in a dignified way, signalling to her that he is, as ever, patience personified.

I had a good night, thank you, she says.

The night was so-so, she makes it out to have been substantially better than it was, she eats a piece of bread with marmalade, sips her tea and starts feeling fidgety again. She remembers the letter in the garden house – oh dear – and no, she definitely did *not* bring it up here to the bedroom; it is still lying on her desk, which is why she now has to pretend to her husband that she is desperate to work, or to try at least, for the few hours available in her schedule.

Her husband is clearly delighted that she is thinking of her work, for he nods and slaps his thigh as if in confirmation, before getting to his feet and heading off to London for his weekly meeting at the magazine.

She has no idea what his work there involves exactly, she must have known at some point, but now she can barely remember. In all honesty, she thinks little of his work, perhaps this is envy, jealousy, as she calls it, because he carries on undeterred, whereas she allows herself to be awed by those damn Germans.

They will not know where to flee to, the enemy will close in quickly and then the front door will be torn down, heavily armed men will

enter, brutes who lack the slightest sympathy, and who are not quite so dissimilar to her as she may think.

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The letter, what a relief, is still on the desk, exactly where she left it yesterday. She could read again what she wrote in a kind of mania, and she considers doing so, but then opts to put the letter unread in a pile of papers.

Well, now she does not know what to do. She alternates between sitting and pacing around, moving from the chair to the sofa and back to the chair again, staring outside at the trees bending in the wind, staring at all the paper lying on her desk, the scratches and stains, none of which say anything to her.

She has never felt so at ease as within these walls, but strangely she can barely remember why. She sees nothing but a collection of objects that have lost their significance, as if she had already moved out years ago and had popped back to discover that it was all a figment of the imagination.

How she would love now to be the Virginia she once was, when she got hold of her rivals' books and knew after the first couple of pages that she would pick them to pieces, in the secure knowledge that she was simply better, head and shoulders above them – her husband of course, her would-be friend Katherine Mansfield, or the nauseating Joyce with his

heavily egocentric *Ulysses*. Joyce was a he-goat, one of those feral creatures one came across everywhere, amongst the middle class, workers, aristocracy. Most were nasty animals, toads, beetles, flies, apes and hens, people with the intellects of a medium-sized rabbit and who deserved to have this said to their face time and again. She once did this needlessly to a successful playwright, but what a pleasure it was to destroy that woman's life on a single evening, she remembers it well.

These days she would probably no longer be in a position to do such a thing. It appears she lacks the anger, the fire of envy that once propelled her to the top, without her knowing for sure what would be at the top, a light that never went out, twinkling and soft, in which one was both visible and hidden.

She has lived for a long time in this hazy state. And enjoyed it. Wherever she has turned up there has been a soft murmur: look, it's her, she's mingling with us, she's doing us the honour, she's deigning to give us... a phrase, a smile. Is that really her? I wonder what she thinks of us. That dog novel of hers is supposed to be delightful. And how beautifully she writes about lighthouses, the sea and people's anxious thoughts and feelings. One can scarcely believe that a single mind has produced such texts.

She has no idea how any of it was possible. Perhaps for all those years she was under the protection of the gods, but then they lost interest

and turned her into the floundering nobody she was, regrettably, from the very beginning.

\*

Around midday she realises it was a mistake to come down to her writing house. This visit has not done her any good; not even Leonard believes such visits are helpful at the moment.

Louie has prepared a light lunch in the kitchen, but of course food is of no help either; she feels her whole body is gearing up to torture her again. Her list of symptoms is long and she knows it off by heart: the bothersome headaches, the racing pulse, the anxiety and nervousness, and then the endless lying awake at night that she tries to combat with sleeping pills, sedatives and walks, often in vain.

What a pity the weather is unsuitable for walks at the moment; she starts to shiver at the very thought of it. Besides, she is in no mood to go out and – how to put it? – explain to the river, to the gods who inhabit it and are looking out for her, but who also demand something in return. Gratitude is the wrong word.

She is not a grateful person. For example, she practically never says thank you to Leonard. He looked tired when he left and almost as delicate as her, but it does not bother her to see him like this. On the contrary, men



must be of a certain age before anybody will take them seriously. And anyway, she likes the lines on his face, the rugged terrain that it is and was even when she first met him.

It occurs to her that they have not really talked to each other in days; he regularly asks how she is, whether she needs anything and lets her know his concern, but he avoids coming close, probably because he senses she does not want him to, while at the same time that is all she wants.

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Leonard does not believe in gods, of course. He believes in reason and discipline, he believes in hard work, in messages that have to be drummed into people, whereas she would be hard put to explain what she has been writing about all these years – about moments in life, perhaps, their coming and going, their fleetingness, their presence.

With her everything is dappled, colourful in a shimmering way, without any identifiable contours, whereas with Leonard lines are everywhere, one knows where one is at any given moment – when he is delivering one of his brilliant speeches, in his terribly wise books that explain the world, few if any of which will survive for posterity, she believes.

The fact that he stopped writing novels is probably the reason why their relationship has never seriously unravelled. If he had continued with fiction they would have split up long ago. For two people cannot live under the same roof writing novels, she is certain of that; too much space would be required, the multitude of voices, the tones, the colours spreading to every corner, not tolerating anything else around them.

When she is finally out of the way, he will possibly try again, although she would not in all seriousness advise him to. The novel about his years as a colonial official in Ceylon was not bad, but his second one about the period when they met, in which he portrayed her as a cold, egotistical monster – that really shocked her, upset her in fact, which she refused to admit at first, but eventually did and soon afterwards she was admitted to the clinic, where for a long while she would not allow him near her, then she beat him and only forgot much later, burying the dreadful book inside herself.

She does not know whether he still thinks of her like this; perceptions change, hers no less than his. In the early years, when she was a nobody, she admired him greatly and there were ten enjoyable years, in which both of them became minor celebrities, each in their own right, until at some point only she was the famous one, and it began to bother her that he spent her money and no longer made much of an effort as a writer. In

short, he was not earning so much as a penny and nor was he trying particularly hard to.

It takes her a while to search inside herself and retrieve that anger from the past, but look! it remains almost unscathed. Perhaps she was too generous when she refused to share their marital income equally as they had before, for it is still shared today, albeit only from a certain sum onwards.

Leonard is a shadow husband.

He travels to London once a week to talk about his stupid magazine, he gives speeches about the dream of socialism, he looks after her, but she should not wish to change places with him, and if so, then in one aspect only: that he accepts his life for what it is, even though he has much less of everything than her.

\*

When he returns around five o'clock she is pleased. Her headache has not improved; if anything it has got worse and if she does not take something for it soon it will become unbearable. She needs some fresh air, preferably in the company of her husband, who agrees at once, urging her to fasten her coat to the very top and take her scarf and hat, for although it is partly sunny outside it is windy and chilly too.

And so they go out. To begin with they follow the approximate route she took yesterday, heading further to the left across the bog meadow rather than along the river, as she has no desire to encounter him right now, even though her gaze keeps wandering in his direction several times, giving him a silent, coy greeting.

Yes, I'm here, I'm going for a walk with my husband.

Now, in the late-afternoon light, the riverbank shimmers a tender violet colour. The first narcissi are visible, the inevitable cows, individual rocks which she assumes were witness to yesterday's scenes and have formed a disagreeable opinion of her.

She has little experience of keeping secrets, apart from the thing with Vita, although at each stage Leonard knew everything, the general picture at least, if not the detail.

Is it ever better if the other person knows?

She cannot talk to her husband about this other one, even though Leonard must have known for ages, suspected that there is someone. As is his wont, however, he has not said a word about it.

In truth it almost feels nice again to walk with Leonard like this. He talks about his meeting, the strangely quiet impression London made on him. From time to time she takes his hand and holds onto it for a while, to make him believe that there is not much wrong with her and that yesterday she was merely out for a stroll rather than for any other particular reason.

She would actually prefer to walk alone. One thinks better on one's own, besides, she has always regarded this landscape as hers, the gentle undulation of the hills over there, all of which she has climbed over the course of the decades, the meadows, pasture, skies, the sounds and smells which are only there because she is receptive to them. In all likelihood this is her misfortune.

So how will it end, she asks. With me, with the two of us, with this cursed war? Will it ever end?

Yes, he says, although she has not specified what is to end.

All the same he says yes. In a few years, I don't know, he says. He begs her to be patient, with herself, with him. These are difficult times for us all, for the whole country.

That is indubitably true, says she who was seeking a different answer. She has no idea how she can carry on living, whereas other people fear for their lives but always in the knowledge that they have to go on.

At once she feels totally vulnerable beside him. He is a man walking by her side, the man with whom she shares a house, but he offers her not the slightest protection. She is completely on her own, she realises; their long marriage has not changed this one iota.

She cannot see what will save her now except, perhaps, for the landscape, and so she retrieves what she can from it, its undulations, the dusky hues, its sheer expansiveness and dependability, the drift of the

clouds in the sky, the occasional faint odour. She will not wander through this landscape many more times, that much is clear to her, whereas Leonard is bravely pretending that this is just a normal walk, to be followed by others whenever it takes his fancy.

Let's turn around, she says, so they turn around.

On the way back the wind blows directly into their faces and she has to keep hold of her hat to prevent it from flying away. This is fun of sorts, something to smile about, and indeed she does smile, later, when she gazes in the looking glass in the hallway, with its flowery fabric frame and is amazed by how unscarred she appears, how *normal*, even though this is certainly not the case; indeed the very opposite is true.

Yes? says Leonard, who is heading for the steps, and for whatever reason she thanks him, for their walk, for the life that they have lived totally in vain. Why does it not give her any support?

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Clearly she is in a worse state than she thought. She is seriously sick, all manner of things are malfunctioning in her head, in her soul, or wherever else things can go wrong and cannot be repaired at the drop of a hat.

She has no name for her condition, but she knows that it comes in waves; the thing that lurks inside her, which may just be jealousy, she

sometimes thinks, her odd way of feeling, remembering, even though her memories are unwelcome at the moment, all the corpses dwelling inside her, wandering around complaining as if she were responsible for their deaths.

She has joined Leonard and is sitting by the fireplace in the upstairs drawing room. The man who is a total stranger to her has lit a fire and is reading, while she finds herself harassed by various corpses and is having trouble keeping them in their place.

Katherine is right at the front. Her rival, who was a sort of friend, has been dead for almost twenty years, but now she thinks she is missing her, her toughness, her surliness, behind which goodness knows what was hiding.

Was she ever here?

She asks Leonard and he says no, but she is certainly here now, with her silly pageboy haircut, yes exactly, and that queer girl-like expression in which one could not immediately detect her fiery ambition.

She should like to know what Katherine the corpse wants from her.

Do you still believe that you are the more talented?

She was almost pleased when she heard that Katherine had died, and she remembers little more than that. What was it she liked about her? The kindred spirit? Her mouth? Her imprecise smile?

She was not able to discuss her work so openly with anyone else, everything about her writing that is inexpressible, the cracks and lines in good texts, their dirty inner lives, all the lies as well as a modicum of truth.

For a few years she paid intermittent visits to this other woman, this sister. One day she became an author of their publishing house, but she was not a really brilliant writer; her texts were interesting, they sold and the newspapers were full of KM, which was sure-fire proof of how bad she was.

And yet, in her own way she loved this breezy creature. She would say as much to Katherine if she were here now, for the dead are not sensitive, one can say all manner of things to them, even express one's love belatedly.

Somewhere on the shelves there must be a copy of what's-that-story, which they printed, but she has no desire to look for it, what would be the point of that, especially as she has barely read a word in weeks.

\*

They are still sitting by the fire, Leonard has switched on the wireless, which thank goodness is broadcasting music rather than news, a piece by Bach: the toccata in C major.



Bach's music has always calmed her somehow; she fancies she can see every single note before her, the way they dance and stumble, but in the most beautiful order. Everything about this music is clear and comforting, and for a brief while she indeed feels something akin to comfort; if music like this toccata exists, then worries such as she ones that haunt her have no meaning. I am eternal, the music says, I will never die, whereas you are definitely going to die. Why does this frighten you?

She is not at all frightened, on the contrary.

Those damned Germans, she hears Leonard say. He is reading and listening to the wireless at the same time, thinking about politics as ever, and about the fact that Bach was a German too, it is difficult to believe. She wonders whether one can listen to this music and also be one of those barbarians, and the answer is that one probably can.

The toccata has not yet finished, but now she thinks she hears men's voices giving the order to advance quickly, young, foolish voices, barking, yes, over there, over there by the wall. She can hear all of this, hears someone beginning to cry softly, a child as she realises to her surprise, and this child – can it be true? – is crying over her. Leonard is less than ten feet away, but there is no doubt that the child is crying and she finds this comforting, it is strange, how did this child suddenly appear out of thin air?

\*

It is past ten o'clock, normally the time when she retires to her room, but this evening she wishes to stay here. She asks Leonard to switch off the wireless so she can sit here in silence; she should like to sit in the silence of the late evening and the things around her.

She is uncertain whether, given her condition, this is a good idea, and Leonard seems to have his doubts too, but he does switch off the wireless and with a nod of encouragement goes next door. She hears him pacing around for a while in the bathroom, a gentle whooshing, his footsteps on the wooden floor.

She goes downstairs to the kitchen and fetches a glass of water for her pills. She drinks it on the move, washing the pills down, even though she has recently lost faith in their efficacy, but so what, they are not making her any worse.

And now finally there is silence.

She goes into the downstairs drawing room, which is not heated; it is rather chilly, but quiet, and she likes this sort of silence, even though the silence is certainly not a void, but full of life, a pulsating something that stretches then constricts again and has its source in objects.

Are objects not the most reliable things of all?

The table, the chairs, which have been occupied all these years, where they have sat and talked, the bureau, the rugs, vases, books, lamps and windows that have given light, all those things that are wooden, glass, metal and paper.

The objects are like her, living, waiting, sleeping, and now she feels herself slowly becoming drowsy. The tablets are beginning to take effect, tinkering with her, in the depths of her mind, home to all those circuits that now and then fail to work properly, sometimes yes, sometimes no. It is the lack of sleep that makes her mad; if she could sleep it would at a stroke put an end to the madness, to the spinning thoughts that surge inside her head to form massive waves, then rapidly drag themselves back down onto muddy ground, where it is incredibly dark and silent and good.

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**[THURSDAY, 20<sup>TH</sup> MARCH]**

No sooner is she in bed than she starts to torment herself with the novel again. For days she has been trying to persuade herself that there is no cause to worry, but a sense of failure persists, the suspicion that it urgently needs rewriting. But how could she, in her state, accomplish that, seeing as it is due to appear in autumn?

Although Leonard has been full of praise, sadly she does not trust him in the slightest, nor can she remember what she was intending precisely, a sort of conclusion that something is irrevocably over, never to return, which is what she has said in practically all of her novels.

She cannot remember anymore.

In all honesty, she has to admit that her work is the output of a sentimental gossip. Everything about her is style, everything is detail, but in fact she has very little to say, nothing that speaks to the reader, only ever a few leftovers, glittering residues that she has collected and kept like an idiot and in which no one but museum curators and archivists will be interested in the future.

Her novels are museums in which what is lost can be viewed behind frosted glass: childhood, the last century, basically all the centuries since Shakespeare, not forgetting that thing with Bloomsbury, the intermezzo of peace.

Aircraft keep flying through her novel – is this really all that occurs to her about the current catastrophe?

Her longing for water comes to the fore; the longing that everything should have an ending. But what then? One day it comes to an end, and what then?

She knows she exaggerates far too much, but what a masochistic pleasure it is to exaggerate without restraint and believe that one lacks any

talent, especially as there is not much in her other novels either. Or at least there is barely anything she remembers in detail, although she is not making much of an effort. All she recalls is the odd turn of phrase, the vague tone, a character like Mrs Dalloway – fine, but the rest is merely haze; who did she think she was and what did she imagine she was capable of?

At any rate she is going to rework the novel. She urgently needs to find another title too, for what sort of title is that, *Between the Acts*? It is an acknowledgement of all that has been left out, and an admission that this time she has been unable to come up with much. In a word, she is finished as a writer.

\*

She does herself no favours with such deliberations, none of which are new and for that very reason demoralise her. Instead she ought to try to get a little sleep, and send all those night-time questions and doubts packing. This is easier said than done, however, for her visitors are persistent, they have no intention of being sent packing. They may be shooed away briefly, but the next moment they resume their places, around the bed, on her pillow, it is dreadful, they do as they please.

Of course she could reassure herself that she is in a familiar situation: giving something away, after having made every conceivable effort, having grafted for months on end, and all of a sudden considering it to be a botched job.

From experience she ought to know that it has been like this with all her books, but oddly she forgets each time. Or rather, she does not forget, but is firmly convinced that this time it is completely different: Leonard has lied to her and, out of consideration for her need to please others, her publisher will lie to her too and will neglect to say that her strange novel about the theatre is a failure.

This need to please is terrible, of course, it is the gravest error of her life, which does nothing to alter the fact that she has only ever written to please, and then has been left standing there empty-handed, because one never really gets anything back from one's admirers, at least nothing that endures.

This is what, in a nutshell, she is feeling, and it is desperate. She would like to sleep, she would like to write, but she is absolutely raddled, and in such a state she starts to pray. She has not tried to pray since childhood, and it is difficult, as one does not rightly know to whom to turn. Besides, the gods are ten a penny; it would take days to enumerate them all, even though perhaps there is a being responsible for her and seeing to it that she will be able to sleep and write again.

This is her request. It is more a supplication than a request, although she wonders what right she has to do this. Those who turn to the gods have reached their end, but that is not a right, even though she believes *she* does have a certain right. After all, she has revolutionised the modern novel and with the greatest possible endeavour published a dozen books; she has toiled away and tormented herself, so please let me not wither, and with this request, this entreaty – the gods have mercy – she falls asleep.

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She sleeps for the hours that follow too, very peacefully it seems. All the questions have gone, even though they are still lurking and will come knocking at the next opportunity, tomorrow or the day after at the latest, which is barely more than a pause for breath.

Tomorrow, although she does not know this yet, her sister Vanessa will come to visit, and perhaps that is something which will please and refresh her.

Vanessa is her confidante and living proof of her experience that one can only rely on women.

Perhaps, if she were woken now, she would be able to state at once what men mean to her. Men are egotists, she would say, lifeless creatures

essentially, adding that she had come to know a few of them very well, beginning with her father who would beg tyrannically for attention, her monstrous half-brothers, later all those sodomites from her Bloomsbury days as well as all the other men who crossed her path: admirers, colleagues, employees, unfaithful Clive, with whom she betrayed her sister and Leonard for a goodly while – well, not really betrayed – as well as men from the publishing industry, the boring but important gentlemen who fill parties.

Strictly speaking, however, she would have to admit that she knows little *about* men. She has written about them, certainly, about their power, how they have snared everything for centuries, their lack of consideration, their ignorance. But about the individual specimen, shall we say, she knows virtually nothing, how he functions on the inside, how he hopes and loves, how he inhabits his body.

She has effectively had no physical experience with men, save for that bloody misunderstanding on their honeymoon. She does not know how men feel desire, how heavy or light a penis is, how one washes it, good God – all she knows is how enslaved and pig-headed men are, and how infuriatingly insouciant and free.

Men are liars and rapists.

One only needs to open the newspaper, as Isa in the novel does *The Times*, in which by chance she reads about a trooper who abuses a girl,



throwing her onto a bed in the barrack room and ripping off her clothes, at which she screams and even slaps him in the face, though this does not prevent her ruin.

That's what men mean to me, she would say, really all of them, Leonard too, even though Leonard is different, but otherwise all of them without exception, including her homosexual friends, only that they at least had the good grace to plunge each other into whichever misfortune happened to be current at the time, but in her condition what business of hers are other people's misfortunes?

Nothing is any of her business. Her job is to avoid going mad, to sleep away her madness, shall we say, and in fact she has slept this whole time. Outside the wind is whistling, a few boughs are creaking, which perhaps soothes and invigorates her, for even in her sleep she is forever on the move, somewhere down or up where her dreams sit or the gods, or both.